

International Agriculture Program Flexes Networking Muscle

The Calgary Stampede's International Agriculture Program is intent upon showcasing Alberta's agricultural industry to the world, and during the 2009 Stampede, it welcomed more of the world than it has at any time in recent memory.

During this year's edition of the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth, representatives of 40 countries — a big jump from last year's total of 32 — walked through the door of the International Room from July 3 to 12, took a load off and talked turkey with various representatives of Alberta agriculture.

"We very literally go from A to Z. From Argentina to Zambia, from Australia to Zimbabwe," says Herb McLane, chairman of the International Agriculture Program. "We have a number of countries with whom we interact very well, and on a regular basis — the United Kingdom, particularly England, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, of course.

"Some of the more obscure countries don't send us a lot of folks, but we will still get a handful. Regardless of size, all countries and all representatives are important to our network development."

The IAP, which celebrated its 25th anniversary this year, was formed to bring members of the global agricultural community together to share ideas, facilitate business opportunities and foster cultural understanding, with international guests enjoying a big helping of unique Western hospitality.

And even with the downturn in the world economy since the third quarter of 2008, the program still attracted approximately 1,900 visitors to the International Room during this year's Stampede through various connections — tour groups, the IAP's sponsorship program, its outreach booth in the Agrium Ag-tivity in the City display, and the IAP membership itself.

"With respect to the networking opportunities and the business relationship development we provide, we were quite pleased with the overall response this year," McLane says. "In fact, given the international economic situation, and the number of folks who are traveling less, we were pleasantly surprised with the outcome."

While the IAP's mandate had traditionally been hospitality-based, the program's leadership has in recent years begun to focus more on business liaisons and network development, in order to expand its clientele base. The fruits of the IAP's labour are already apparent, says vice-chair Ted Haney.

"We saw international businesspeople who came to Stampede because it's an enjoyable thing to do, but very specifically were looking for something related to their business while here," he remarks.

"For example, I made contact with a worldwide oilseed and pulse procurement officer with a large Asian-based multinational company," adds Haney. "During his time in Canada, he was only able to make the direct business contact he required while at Stampede, in the International Room. That was a tangible result, and it reflected the kind of year we had."

While the IAP has subtly shifted its approach, it has also changed its identity. "We're not just cows and horses any more. We've expanded our stable," notes McLane, whose program now represents sectors such as oilseeds and grains, food services,

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crop and livestock protection, and value-added meat processing.

“We saw more out of Russia and southeast Asia, with very specific business interests, than we’d seen in past years,” says Haney. “And more in the grains, oilseeds and value-added sectors than pure livestock and genetics.”

The IAP has been able to flex its networking muscle, even in difficult economic times, because of a bedrock base of 28 companies that make up its sponsorship program. In three years, the program has more than doubled its sponsorship support, largely from players in the agricultural industry, and has seen a smaller-than-normal turnover in its core sponsors, such as agricultural giant Cargill Canada and oilseed processor Bunge.

The IAP also uses the International Agriculture Profile, a glossy annual publication, to develop its program by highlighting trends and developments in Canadian agriculture, particularly in the southern Alberta region. The 40-page magazine is distributed to myriad international guests during the Stampede, and is available upon request through the agricultural administration office.

For more information, please contact:

Tracey Foster or Todd Kimberley

Agriculture Event Coordinator, Agriculture Media

Writer, respectively

Telephone: 403-261-0127

Cells: 403-462-3739; 403-815-2752

Fax: 403-262-3067

E-mail: tfoster@calgarystampede.com;

tkimberley@calgarystampede.com

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